

Democratic dialogue and collective learning in the context of self-managed teams

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Abstract

This paper provides a longitudinal, empirical view of the multifaceted and reciprocal processes of organizational learning in a context of self-managed teams. Organizational learning is seen as a social construction between people and actions in a work setting. The notion of learning as situated (Brown & Duguid 1989, Lave & Wenger 1991, Gherardi & al. 1998, Easterby-Smith & Araujo 1999, Abma 2003) opens up the possibility for placing the focus of research on learning in the community rather than in individual learning processes. Further, in studying processes in their social context, we cannot avoid taking power relations into consideration (Contu & Willmott 2003).

The study is based on an action research with a methodology close to the 'democratic dialogue' presented by Gustavsen (2001). This gives a ground for research into how the learning discourse developed in the case study organization over a period of 5 years, during which time the company abandoned a middle management level of hierarchy and the teams had to figure out how to work as self-managed units. This paper discusses the (re)construction of power relations and its role in organizational learning. Power relations are discussed both in vertical and horizontal work relations.

A special emphasis is placed on the dialectic between managerial aims and the space for reflection on the side of employees. I argue that learning is crucial in the search for the limits for empowerment and that these limits are negotiated both in actions and speech. This study unfolds a purpose-oriented learning process, constructing an open dialogue, and describes a favourable context for creative, knowledge building communities.

The research setting

This paper is based on a longitudinal action research on a small printing house during 1999-2004. The first intervention took place in 1999 in the form of a 'learning project' which lasted in 9 months. The researcher acted as the project facilitator. The empirical material contains research notes from this participative element of the research and thereafter interviews and discussion notes made over the following 4 years. The interviewees were both managers and print workers. The analysis of the material has been carried out in two phases, first evaluating the results of the intervention and the second taking the form of a content analysis of the interviews.

The practical purpose of the research was originally to help a small company to address an urgent need for up-skilling its staff, which itself was consequent upon tremendous changes in production technology. At the same time as these changes in working methods the company (Printing House) had decided to simplify its organizational structure. It cut out two middle management levels and started to implement a form of self-management on its teams. The teams had no appointed team leaders, but a representative who participated in coordinating weekly meetings. The role of the team representative was to circulate within the team. This context of empowerment represented a challenge to examine the relations between organizational learning and empowerment. In this paper, the research task has focused on an investigation of the reconstruction of the power relations and learning culture of the firm. In this small firm context, empowerment is seen as the teams' right to decide on all work related matters, including organizing workloads and work lists, autonomously. The empowerment was a structural change, but at the same time it was a communication of trust from the production manager to the teams. The learning project was the first independent, or at least highly participative, task of the teams.

The term empowerment in this paper is used interchangeably with the term self-management. In this case study, the word empowerment was never used by the company in practice, for the simple

reason that a word equivalent in meaning to empowerment does not exist in the Finnish language. It has been used only as a translation among researchers who have adopted it from the dominant English research literature. Therefore, in this research, I use the word empowerment in emphasizing the democratic management philosophy of the Printing House and my approach in the action research, to appreciate the different but equal voices which are co-creating the learning and working culture of the company. Thus, it is here seen as a leader-member relational construct.

Building a learning discourse in Printing House

The learning project aimed to allocate the training resources of the company appropriately and looked for best practice in up-skilling its staff. All print workers were invited to join the project and to start with, to write up all the skills and knowledge needed in their work. They constructed job profiles for each team and described their job requirements in their own words. The future skills needs were discussed with other teams and production managers in cross-team meetings and were compared to the present levels, in order to identify skills gaps. The resulting skills maps were useful in planning the future training, but they also opened up the connection between each individual and the goals of the firm. Skills maps gave each individual an idea of his or her work in relation to the whole organization, as they put themselves onto the map by discussing with each other the relations between different working phases.

The working method of the process took the form of discursive meetings. Each worker's tasks and skills were equally appreciated, as were their opinions, and each was encouraged to take part in the discussions. This method of working and of action research is close to the democratic dialogue presented by Gustafsen (2001). The participants met in both team and cross team meetings. The production manager participated in some of the meetings, but not in all of them. The purpose of the cross-team meetings was to dismantle the barriers to co-operation and open communication between the teams which had tended to arise. Staff members were practicing engaging in dialogue, in developing understanding of their own thoughts and opinions in relation to those of the others (Bohm & Nichol 2004). The working method made visible the company's management philosophy that the most effective knowledge is that in the possession of the workers themselves and for that reason the teams would be able to implement self-management.

At the beginning of the project, workers were suspicious about its purpose. They knew that some of the workers would have to move to another plant, recently bought by the company. They also had in their minds the recession in the economy which had occurred just couple of years ago, when there had been lots of redundancies. They were afraid of that this project would effectively rank them and provide a rationale for the next round of sackings. Despite all of this, they participated (except for one minor group) and became quite enthusiastic in mapping and planning their future learning. One indication of the openness of their discussions was the ability to talk about the scales of measurement used by each individual. The group related the individual skill estimates to the combination of the others' in order to have a realistic picture of the state of the teams' skills. Thereby the skills' maps were their own but commonly agreed views of the situation instead of an 'objective' measurement from outside.

The social character of learning became obvious in this kind of dialogic working method. The workers created new vocabulary for talking about knowledge and skills which did not attribute them to individuals only. Skills are something which are co-created in the community, in relation to a wide range of tasks. The meaning of the word 'training', for example, had previously been attached only to the formal training received in school and on courses. Now its meaning began to include also that of practical knowledge building through experience, which could also be arranged by themselves when teaching each other. Problem solving in work situations also became part of the understanding of learning, as well as learning from mistakes. It seemed that they had created a future oriented, positive learning discourse.

Evaluating the project: the reciprocity of the change process

Directly after the learning project, the product manager reported an unexpected change of attitudes: observing that the workers had assumed an air of responsibility for their own, as well as

team, learning and also for teaching each other. This had not existed before. Previously, the old fashioned way of maintaining your position, or creating an impression of superiority over others, was based on being more knowledgeable than other staff members. Traditionally that had resulted in not sharing knowledge. She also mentioned a new, interactive improvement of working methods and problem solving which could be detected in the working culture. Even four years later, the product manager continued to state that the biggest advantage of the project had been the adoption of a dialogic working culture. The original aim of the project had been development of a mechanical skills mapping process to help the company to plan their future training, but in addition, they had gained changes in attitudes and in the working culture.

The learning project had obviously improved the quality of communication, which was a prerequisite for adapting to the move towards self-management. Engaging in the dialogue had developed the self-efficacy of the workers and their ability to express their opinions, as well as to listen to the different opinions. The interactive problem solving is here seen as organizational learning and a less intensive form of dialogue. The concept of dialogue means a way of sharing knowledge and exploiting it by also listening to differing opinions (cf. Abma 2003, April 1999, Gustavsen 2001, Isaacs 1993 and 2001, Morgan 1997, Senge 1990, Schein 1993, Örndahl 1999). In this paper, I have presented a description of dialogue in a practical situation.

Staff at Printing House had developed the ability to learn, which also represents the ability to change (Jacques 1996, Pedler et al. 1991). Thus, the limits of empowerment could be negotiated in practice, in action and in talking. These limits were (re)constructed within the space of organizational learning in an ongoing process. According to Yukl (1998), power is based on authority and control and on the target's acceptance of power. The target of power assumes the limits of his power according to his capability to carry out the assignments given to him. The relationship between empowerment and the assuming of power seeks a balance through constant negotiation in actions and dialogue (Vähämäki & Lähteenmäki 2005).

Management and subordinates are here seen as participants in a dialectic process. The decision to implement empowerment is made by the management, but the phenomenon of empowerment is not realized if the other side of the equation - the employees - do not assume the power offered to them. There has to be enough time and space for reflection on both sides. In this company, it took two to three years before the teams functioned as self-managing.

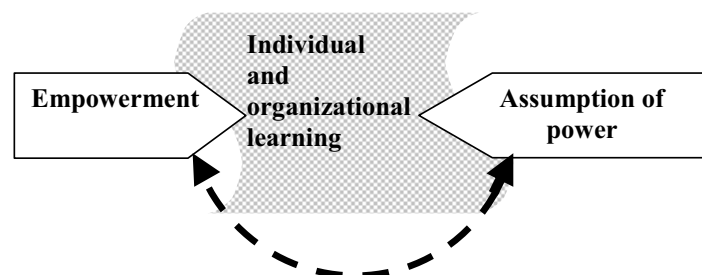


Figure 1. The dialectic between empowerment and the assumption of power

The dialectic in Figure 1 can be seen as bridging the gap between the aims of management and the practical, multifaceted implementation of empowerment by the subordinates. The theoretical discussion of empowerment has been polarized between two opposite views of it, the one emphasizing the managerial actions and the other seeing empowerment as a psychological state of a subordinate (Fenwick 2003). Understanding the power relation as power-with, rather than power-over, this discrepancy could be overlooked (cf. Follett in Fox & Urwick 1973). Boje and Rosile (2001) suggested that the adoption of the term co-power, referring to a reciprocal engagement of power-with processes would be a way of overcoming the worker-management dualism.

The liminality of learning and the sense of responsibility

My first consideration of the quality of the dialectic between empowerment and the assumption of power was based on the conversations between myself and the production manager of Printing House. In order to uncover the employees' point of view, I set up individual, pair and group interviews with 8 people from the production teams. The interviewing took place two and three years after the implementation of 'the learning project'. I tried to encapsulate the employees' voices and their points of view of the change process, as well as their sense of the words 'knowledge' and 'learning', by asking how are these elements visible in the everyday working situation.

In response, a sense of responsibility was mentioned as an important motivator for learning, but also as a result of learning. Learning in practical situations was mentioned as the best way of learning, and different examples of that were described. Good skills and knowledge materialize in the fluency of production. Fluency of production, seemingly, was the ultimate goal and expression of workers' well-being in the every day working environment. The role of responsibility was repeatedly mentioned in every interview in relation to learning and fluency of work. A responsible worker takes care to learn his/her tasks well and tries to understand the wholeness of production. The employee who wants to learn seeks diverse tasks in order to develop him/herself. Responsibility, or the lack of it can also be seen as evidence for an assumption or not of power. Managerial power or self management was mentioned only when it was asked about. My interpretation is that an effective exercise of power implies that the production is running smoothly and the power is invisible.

The stories of disturbances in production came up in questions about learning by making mistakes. Mistakes were of two kinds; they were either caused by a lack of knowledge and skills, or by a lack of responsibility. Through these negative examples we can examine the prerequisites of smooth production. Collective actions were proposed for solving these situations, like talking about mistakes and learning from them, even though talking about one's own mistakes, or pointing out others' was felt to be difficult.

The incompetent working of a colleague was usually not judged too harshly but was explained: attributed to the colleague being fearful, subject to physical restrictions, or unwilling to learn. Thus, the enabling factors for learning could include courage, aptitude for the task and a willingness to learn. The fact of a variation in capabilities for learning was mentioned but not condemned. Even if the difficulties experienced around learning annoyed some, they were mainly understood. The working community adapted itself to the differences by sharing tasks according to individual abilities. The interviewees stated that there are different learning styles and personalities in every workplace.

When talking about serious disturbances in production, the workers mainly pointed to one specific task and person. Other workers were irritated when somebody caused harm to them by choosing the easiest tasks and by not following the functional order. This behavior disrupted the communal atmosphere. In this case, too, they mentioned a lack of knowledge, but now the interviewees showed no understanding and did not attempt to provide explanations for it. The lack of responsibility was emphasized. Ultimately, the way to solve this problem would have been (in their opinion) intervention from the manager. Otherwise they never mentioned a need for her intervention. The problematic person was a member of the one group which did not participate in 1999 in the learning project. That group of 3-5 people had not adopted the conversational or interactive way of problem solving and they did not show the sense of common responsibility for production.

Vertical and horizontal power relations in Printing House

The above description of the learning process in Printing House shows how the organization had learned to learn: they had adopted a collective and dialogic form of problem solving. Or we might say that they had created a new learning culture. Most of the members had taken the trouble to extend their skills area either off their own bat, or on the initiative of the production manager. They felt that their work was interesting and challenging. The learning discourse in the company was quite harmonious. The understanding of the company's capabilities and ways to develop them

was shared among management and employees. This shared vision had been created commonly during the intervention and the years following it. The production manager encouraged people to participate in training and sometimes she had to persuade people to do it. Afterwards however, the workers were content with the new capabilities achieved and the responsibility of new tasks. The growing responsibility was merely seen as positive rather than negative, as it also meant a better standard of expertise among colleagues. The expertise was evident when others came to ask for advice. The willingness to help was often mentioned in the interviews. Reciprocity in advice giving was also mentioned, as if no one wanted to assume a status of being better than the others. This was expressed in terms such as: "That comes from the whole group, advising each other".

The democratic behavior among colleagues also resulted in hidden barriers to knowledge sharing. It seemed to be difficult to take on the role of teacher, especially if the other had not asked for help. It was felt as criticism to point out a colleague's lack of skills and some workers were afraid of being labelled as a 'besserwisser'. When there existed a mutual trust and a good atmosphere between the workers, teaching each other seemed to be easier, but difficulties occurred in some relations. Directly after the learning project teaching was also felt to be easier as the people had communally worked out different ways of learning in the work place. As previous research by Edmonson (1999 and Cannon and Edmonson 2001 in Tjosvold et al 2004) has suggested, teams that have developed a common understanding of the value of open discussion for solving problems and the psychologically safe environment to discuss errors, may overcome barriers and learn from mistakes. In this organization, the positive influence of the learning process to the quality of communication seemed to diminish over the years, not in the statements of the management but in the stories of some of the workers.

The otherwise harmonious learning culture was disturbed by the demonstrators who did not want to change. This small group (later only one person) wanted to be managed in the traditional way, with the manager telling them in the mornings what to do. They did not want to have a colleague to advise them, but they wanted to maintain a distance between management and themselves. By so doing, they could also continue to blame the management if something was not to their liking. It seems that self management had caused problems in that one team, and especially in the horizontal power relations. They simply could not organize themselves within the team. (I do not know how these people had behaved in the previous period, in the time of authoritarian management.)

It seemed that problems occurred more in horizontal than in vertical power relations. Obviously the empowering organization was felt as appropriate and the workers expressed both individual and collective responsibility for their duties. Adopting the self-management was thus successful over time. The production manager had given enough space for development of the skills required for independent team working. The disturbances occurred in situations where a worker, or even the group, could not force a colleague to change his behavior or style of work. That was especially difficult when the demonstrator belonged to another team from that in which he caused the problems.

Was the problem raised due to the under development of the power relations after the organizational change? Or had that person been difficult in every situation? When should management interfere? In traditional organizations, management has to solve this kind of problem, but in an empowering organization the employees have to find their own way in organizing and constructing a hierarchy by themselves. If all participate in the decision making there should not be room for demonstrations since the decision is theirs and they all have been negotiating about it.

Discussion

I see a clear similarity between the idea of empowerment and the idea of dialogue, which emphasizes listening to every participant's voice and making and creating something in common. In dialogue, people share their thoughts; they are not playing against each other but with each other. If somebody is being too defensive about his ideas, he cannot engage in a dialogue (Bohm & Nichol 2004). The basic perspective of empowerment is also a win-win relationship (dialectics) between an individual and his superior (Lee & Koh 2001). Mary Parker Follet, as early as in the 1920s, emphasized the reciprocal nature of power-with instead of power-over, meaning that power is a self-developing capacity and managers should give workers a chance to grow in capacity or

power by themselves. Accordingly, organizations should try to include employees in a joint search for the facts and values of situations (Boje & Rosile 2001).

With the case of Printing House we have seen how a work organization can benefit from learning the rules of dialogue. There it was implemented in its less intensive form, in an interactive problem solving. A rehearsal of a true dialogue every now and then, when an organization faces new problems would be worth of carrying out (cf. Abma 2003). In the idea of dialogue presented by Bohm, there is no place for hierarchy. According to Bohm (2004, 49), if there is a set purpose for dialogue that brings authority to the dialogue, it becomes limited. When the method of dialogue has been developed further for the uses of organizational development, this rule has been moderated. Some researchers and practitioners, including April (1999), Isaacs (1993), Senge (1990) and partly also the representatives of the Nordic tradition of the democratic dialogue (see Kasvio et al. 1994) seem to prefer a target-oriented dialogue. I have adopted the last mentioned approach. Dialogue can certainly be practiced without any targets for the content, in order to learn the rules of dialogue and the way of thinking together. However, in a business context, the constant pressure of time calls for combining some target oriented content to the dialogue sessions.

In Printing House, whilst the other workers had been able to engage in dialogue, one wasn't. Being a democratic company with space for reflection, this was allowed, or at any rate, they had no 'hard' means of changing the situation. As an outsider, I would say that for maintaining the good and positive atmosphere, the management should have intervened in this situation. The long lasting disturbance created doubt about the efficacy of empowerment. Within this study, I did not have a chance to follow the situation in practice and see how big the impact of this long lasting episode was on the motivation and behavior of others. However, it raises the question of how to address the real challenges of empowerment, namely its limits. The manager did not interfere because she tried to follow the rules of empowerment, but the other workers felt the situation was unfair.

Learning seemed to participate in the re-structuring of the power relations in Printing House. The old hierarchical form of organization gave way to positions created through skills and sharing of knowledge. Over the years the team structure of the production work evolved into more or less tightly knit groups or working pairs. To give strong support to the evolution of new structures can be seen as a task of the management in an empowering organization. It could be compared to the specific managerial effort for the communities of practice, as claimed by Wenger and Snyder (2000). Encouraging further learning could also be understood as nurturing the passion for learning described by Gheradi (2003), as the employees can really experience the joy of learning when they are given the opportunity to plan it themselves, as this example shows.

Conclusions

The combination of organizational learning and the evolution of new creative communities of practice is a challenge for both the management and the workers. The empowering work organization needs dialectics in setting its limits and this calls for sensitive management and organized, participative learning opportunities to create a culture needed for the dialogue.

The aim of this paper was not to measure how effectively the empowerment was adopted in the case organization, or if the common principles of it are reasonable for all situations. Instead, I wanted to discuss the ways of negotiating its limits. Therefore, instead of striving for a perfect realization of empowerment or to measure it (for whose definition of it would be chosen?) it would be more fruitful to find a suitable implementation of it for each company by negotiating its limits between the two sides.

If both sides of the empowerment, management and employees, are negotiating equally, wouldn't that be real empowerment? In the present case study, as the workers were able to co-create a learning discourse they were also able to co-create their own move into empowerment. Reciprocal mental readiness, trust and courage are required to create a space for reflection and confrontations in the work organization.

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